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Punching, prodding and blocking: the opposition's changing role in politics

Abstract

Australian parliamentary politics has always had a reputation for a certain rough and tumble. In the 1850s, British economist William Stanley Jevons commented on the rowdiness of the proceedings of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly.

Some decades later parliamentarian John Haynes rained blows down on Paddy Crick in the parliament, affectionately known as the “bear pit”.

In comparison, today’s parliamentary politics are a somewhat tame affair, with any aggression playing out verbally.

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The new opposition leader, Bill Shorten, has very little leverage over the government. AAP Image/Lukas Coch

Australian parliamentary politics has always had a reputation for a certain rough and tumble. In the 1850s, British economist [William Stanley Jevons](#) commented on the rowdiness of the proceedings of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly.

Some decades later parliamentarian John Haynes [rained blows down on Paddy Crick](#) in the parliament, affectionately known as the “bear pit”.

In comparison, today’s parliamentary politics are a somewhat tame affair, with any aggression playing out verbally.

The role of [Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition](#) in Australia’s Westminster system government is to hold the government of the day to account. The system is designed to be adversarial with even the layout of parliamentary chambers reflecting the great divide between the “ins” and the “outs”.

Such an arrangement is not conducive to consensus but to conflict; the opposition attacks and the government of the day defends. The two sides – and it is assumed that there will be only two primary players – are not meant to be friends but adversaries. That is how those schooled in the Westminster system conduct politics.

There will always be some frisson in the Australian parliamentary system but its degree depends on the circumstances of the time. Oppositions are meant to hold governments to

account but the degree of enthusiasm with which they approach this task is linked to how close, or far away, they are from the possibility of attaining government.

An opposition that controls the Senate will play politics much harder than one which is in the minority in both Houses. A government which controls both Houses can pretty well do as it pleases as the opposition has no leverage over it.



As opposition leader, Malcolm Fraser took advantage of the Whitlam government's deep unpopularity. Wikimedia Commons

This explains why then-opposition leader Malcolm Fraser was able to play politics so hard in 1975. The Labor government did not control the Senate and had become deeply unpopular through its scandals and incompetence. Fraser could smell power and behaved accordingly. The temperature of politics rose as a result.

The situation after the 2010 election was somewhat similar. Neither side of politics could command a majority in the House of Representatives. As is well known, Julia Gillard successfully negotiated agreements with Greens MP Adam Bandt and with three of the independent members to give her the slimmest of majorities.

The opposition saw the possibility of power slip through their fingers. Two independent members from conservative electorates decided to align themselves with Labor. In essence the Coalition had been denied government by a few hundred votes; had they won [Corangamite](#), the dynamic would have changed in their favour.

These circumstances explain the intensity with which Tony Abbott as opposition leader invested his role and the extent to which he pursued the government. On the one hand there was the reality that he had gone very, very close to winning government only to be denied by Julia Gillard's negotiating skills.

On the other hand, there was the very real possibility that he could be governing before the next election. Power, perhaps, lay only a heart attack or a car accident away.

The particular intensity of politics between 2010 and 2013 was largely the consequence of these circumstances. Intense disappointment combined with the constant presence of government so tantalisingly close meant that the opposition was forever in election mode, just waiting for an opportunity to present itself.



Parliament: also known as the 'bear pit'. AAP Image/Lukas Coch

This explains why the opposition pursued Labor MP Craig Thomson so vigorously. They only needed one domino to fall. Their cause was assisted by the fact, as in 1975, that the government became increasingly unpopular, in part caused by the compromises it had to make, especially with the Greens, to maintain itself in power.

It is now a matter of history that no domino fell, that the Labor government hung on for its full term. It was a very intense full term in which the opposition was constantly on the attack.

The 2013 elections have changed the dynamic of Australian politics completely. The new government has a commanding majority in the House of Representatives.

The new Senate, which will commence sitting on July 1, 2014, will have a large number of minority players. But it will be possible for the Coalition government to negotiate with a gaggle of largely centre-right senators to achieve the numbers to pass at least some of its legislation. The Labor-Green bloc has lost its control of the Senate.

Under these circumstances, one would expect the temperature of politics to drop considerably. Now in power, Tony Abbott has no need to pursue the tactics which served him well in opposition. His role is to run the country.



Clive Palmer's Palmer United Party will hold the balance of power in the Senate. AAP Image/Paul Miller

The new opposition leader, Bill Shorten, has very little leverage over the government. After June next year, Labor and the Greens will no longer control the Senate.

If this government does not run its full term it will not be because of anything Labor does. It will be because the government finds itself unable to manage Clive Palmer and his Palmer United Party and they decide to block legislation in the Senate, precipitating a double dissolution.

In a way, Palmer has become the key opposition figure, as his party will possess the balance of power in the Senate and there is a history between the colourful Palmer and the Coalition.